

Hungry and homeless in the 'big society': a climate of cuts to services for the homeless puts soup kitchens and welfare provision at risk

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2011/02/09/homelessness-cuts-and-the-big-society/?pfstyle=wp>

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This week the outgoing head of Britain's largest volunteering charity warned that the voluntary sector will be left [devastated](#) by government spending cuts. [Anne Power](#) and [Laura Lane](#) from LSE Housing and Communities undertook a study into soup kitchens run by volunteers for the homeless, and here argue that charitable services to support the homeless and the most vulnerable in society are already stretched to the limit and at serious risk.

The provision of emergency food outdoors is a long-standing and well-established tradition in the UK, but there is a growing fear in the voluntary sector that the recently announced cuts to [Supporting People](#) funding, proposed changes to the [Housing Benefit system](#) and other aspects of the [Localism Bill](#) such as limiting the duty on councils to house homeless people if they can be offered private accommodation will all undermine efforts to combat homelessness.

For centuries charitable giving to the homeless and the provision of 'outdoor welfare services' have occupied a somewhat controversial and contested role, as the state and the public both question the degree to which recipients of welfare are deserving of the assistance offered and the appropriateness of that provision.

In recent years, the potential damage to recipients of charitable acts has been revisited. The introduction of the [Rough Sleepers Initiative](#) in the 1990s, continuing through the work of the Rough Sleepers Unit under the Labour Government, placed an increasing emphasis on the move towards professional, 'aspiration-raising' services within buildings and away from open-access charitable giving on the streets.

Soup runs in Westminster have attracted considerable attention as a form of street provision to rough sleepers. They have been contentious for many years now, and there have been various efforts by the local authority to reduce, co-ordinate and replace soup runs with other forms of provision and support. A significant driver of the soup run debate is the question of why there are such [concentrations of vulnerable people](#) in Westminster. Some argue that soup runs [attract vulnerable people](#) into central areas whilst others suggest that soup runs are active in the areas where homeless and [needy people](#) are already concentrated.

Soup runs raise complex social and moral questions and challenges around how to provide 'appropriate' help and ensure the most needy are able to access help. Views diverge significantly on the most appropriate way of providing help. Central and local government policy makers and statutory-funded services focus on moving people off the streets. They argue that unrestricted support offered by soup runs and other voluntary organisations can have a negative impact on homelessness – damaging health and fuelling addictions. To counter this, partnership work involving all stakeholders, including voluntary organisations, supports the aim of ending rough sleeping.

As part of [research conducted by the LSE](#) in 2009, 105 soup run users and 35

homeless service providers, including 10 soup run providers, were interviewed about their experiences of soup runs and volunteer-run services. The following conclusions were drawn:

- Soup run providers are providing a service that is needed and no clear alternative seems to be available for many of the users.
- Soup runs provide social contact in an informal way and the providers offer direct personal involvement with homeless and vulnerable people beyond simply providing food on the streets.
- The safety net and familiarity that soup runs provide regularly attracted back those who had 'moved on' from the streets into accommodation. Soup runs enable housed people to maintain social contact with friends on the street.

Addressing the issues with soup runs in Westminster seemed imperative but at the time communication between all of the organisations and stakeholders involved was poor and often conflicting. As a result of follow-up work since then, soup run providers work better together and more closely with other agencies including [Building Based Services](#) and their outreach workers, and the Police Safer Streets Homeless Unit. A [Soup Run Forum](#), organised by Housing Justice, serves as an important arena for resolving potential conflicts between soup run providers and statutory service providers. There is now however a serious risk that the current climate of cuts, both to statutory and voluntary services and to benefits, will undermine this essential progress.

[Our final proposals](#) from the research in 2009 now seem to link in with the new government's commitments to localism and the 'big society':

- Motivated volunteers could be trained to offer citizen to citizen engagement to help advise, support, mentor, and befriend homeless and vulnerable citizens.
- Increased day centre provision, with free food and social contact, to include evenings and weekends could rely on volunteers to help people off the streets. Donated food currently given to soup runs could partly be transferred to more indoor provision.
- Free food in informal indoor settings, based in churches that open their doors to the homeless, provides a real alternative to the streets. Volunteers could provide these services. This underpins social contact and builds on social capital.
- Churches and other community organisations within Westminster should investigate the potential for street cafes in sheltered spaces during the day, similar to the [Simon Community Street Café](#).
- Current provision needs to be spread out from Central London so that some soup run providers can offer services in their local environment, e.g. outer London boroughs.

We need to learn the lessons of the significant efforts over the past twenty years to combat homelessness and rough sleeping. Cuts to Supporting People funding, proposed changes to the Housing Benefit system and aspects of the Localism Bill could all contribute to a rise in the number of homeless people who need essential services run by volunteers, and it is only through core political and financial backing in the years ahead that support for people at risk of falling outside all housing systems will continue to be available.

Anne Power spoke at the panel discussion Homelessness: Past, Present and Future at the LSE on Thursday 3 February. The discussion was part of the launch of Street Stories – an oral history project and exhibition organised by clients of St Mungo's. [Click here](#) for more details.

